



The Y.M.C.A. in CANADA

The Chronicle of a Century

MURRAY G. ROSS, PH.D.



Above are shown four of the first Y.M.C.A. buildings in Canada: (1) Charlottetown, P.E.I., (2) Saint John, N.B., (3) Toronto, Ont., and (5) Halifax, N.S., described in Chapter VI. In (4) is shown the second Toronto Y.M.C.A. building, erected at the corner of Yonge and McGill Streets in 1888.

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Introduction

I

THE YEAR 1951 marks the centennial anniversary of the Canadian Y.M.C.A. To honour the long and distinguished record of the Association in Canadian life, it was decided several years ago that a history of the Canadian Y.M.C.A. should be written. This book is meant to mark, therefore, an important milestone in the life of the Y.M.C.A.

When the author, with some reluctance, agreed to write this history, it was with the understanding that he would not be expected to do the "public relations piece," nor the "heart-warming document" which such an event as the centennial celebration undoubtedly deserves. Perhaps it is unfortunate that publications of this latter type are not to be available. But it may be that over the years the present critical and uncensored report of the Association's development may prove of even greater value. For such a report is not, it is hoped, without its own inspiration, nor is it without lessons for the future.

It is of some importance to note that present Canadian Y.M.C.A. leaders were, with few exceptions, disposed to welcome a serious treatment of Y.M.C.A. history. They were (and are) interested in the future as well as the past, and were not averse to critical analysis. The writer was, therefore, given considerable freedom to pursue the task of compiling the history of the Canadian Association as he saw fit.

The only terms of reference provided came from the Annual Meeting of the National Council in 1950. The meeting recommended that the history be "thorough, yet palatable." This catchy but distracting phrase, far from providing a ready guide, has set up a block to the easy writing of this material. If one is thorough, profound, technical, one provides "palatable" material for some, but uninteresting detail for others. And the reverse, of course, is also true. Thus "thorough yet palatable" hardly provided a ready guide in preparing this work.

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The plan actually followed in the writing of this book developed as a result of our early research on this project. This latter uncovered a great deal of material hitherto largely inaccessible, and certainly never reported upon in Canada. The desirability of organizing and utilizing this material took precedence over all else and led to the detailed presentation of the story of the Y.M.C.A. in Canada which follows.

Consideration was given to alternative uses to which these data might be put. They could have been used as the source of a rather popular story of the Y.M.C.A., or as the basis of a careful sociological analysis of Association development in Canada. To select either alternative, however, would mean the sacrifice of much of the material discovered. Further, since it seemed unlikely that similar research would be undertaken in the next few decades, and since either a popular treatment or a careful sociological analysis of the Y.M.C.A. would have to be based on such research, it was decided that the detailed story of the growth of the Association was the first and most important job to be undertaken at the present time. It is hoped, therefore, that material presented in this book will be found useful, not only to those who want to trace developments in the Y.M.C.A. but also to those who wish to do further study either of the Association itself, or of the larger society of which the Y.M.C.A. was (and is) a part.

II

The book is divided into four main sections. In each of these an attempt is made to state the prevailing philosophy of the Association, to record the programme and organizational developments and to examine the relation between the programme and organization, on one side, and the philosophy, on the other. Some attention is given to the character of the society in which each of these four philosophies prevailed; and rather consistent attention is given to clarification of some of the issues which arose in each of these periods. As suggested, however, the major emphasis is given to the task of reporting in some detail, as objectively as possible, the changing patterns of ideology and action within the Association.

It is now generally conceded among historians that history

cannot be written with "complete objectivity." Some "bias," some interest, some "slant" must necessarily be involved in the selection, arrangement, presentation, appraisal and interpretation of materials. No two men would likely write a history which would give the reader exactly the same impression of the Y.M.C.A. The best that can be asked, probably, is that the historian be aware of his frame of reference, that he permit the reader to see it, that, however he derive his first hypotheses, he steadily permit their correction, reversal or modification by the data as they are scrutinized.

In the present case, a persistent effort was made to use general knowledge of the data to suggest hypotheses and principal themes; modified and corrected by the detailed materials discovered, these furnish the framework used for each of the main sections of the book. The writer began the task with only two major preliminary hypotheses, namely: first, that the Y.M.C.A. is beginning to feel the effects of one hundred years of "institutionalization" and is preoccupied with problems of finance, building administration, organization and structure; and, second, that (partly because of this and partly because of present confusions in social, philosophical and theological thought) the Y.M.C.A. is failing to come to grips with fundamental questions of purpose and method. If the two hypotheses stood, the implication might well be that the Association today stood in danger of losing its vitality, because of its inability to make an adequate adjustment to current trends in society. Examination of historical materials, far from disproving the hypotheses, seemed rather to confirm them. One modification that had to be made was to recognize that this "crisis" is not simply a product of the present day but that it is one which had been mounting through the years, becoming especially acute after 1920.

To draw attention to these and other problems of an institution is almost certain to provoke defensive and hostile behaviour on the part of some leaders, in any institution so analyzed. A part of the leadership is almost bound to see its problems in quite different terms. This in no way lessens, however, the writer's obligation to present the issues as they seem, to him, to emerge from the data he has before him. Even if the historian is wrong in his conclusions, he may well do the

institution a service by challenging its leaders, however reluctant, to giving honest consideration to these issues. It is hoped that the Y.M.C.A. will be able to make use of this history in this way.

III

It remains to be said that the writing, organization and interpretation of the material that follows is the sole responsibility of the writer. All of the chapters were read by others, much valuable criticism and comment was made available to the author, but the final judgment as to fact and point of view was his alone. The major limitations of this study arise from the writer's own incapacities as well as from rather strict time and budget allowances. Fourteen months is hardly a sufficient period in which to collect and examine the data available, let alone to study it carefully, and write about it. Further, the lack of time precluded the tracing down of more materials at many points at which conflicting evidence was presented. The relatively superficial consideration given to a number of issues is also related, in part, to these limitations of time and budget. The preparation of histories of the Montreal Y.M.C.A., the United States Y.M.C.A.'s, and the World's Alliance of Y.M.C.A.'s at the same time as this Canadian Association history was being written, suggested the possibility of giving minimum attention to material likely to be covered in detail in these reports. There is presented here, therefore, probably less data on Y.M.C.A. developments in Montreal, in the United States, and in other countries than might ordinarily be expected.

Literally hundreds of people have read and commented on parts of the original manuscript for this book, and the writer can do little more than express appreciation in a very general way for this help. The National Council of Y.M.C.A.'s of the United States was extremely generous in providing office space and permitting the use of its library in New York City. Miss Mary Thorpe, the Council Librarian, was consistently helpful. Association with Dr. C. Howard Hopkins, who was engaged in writing the United States Y.M.C.A. history, was a pleasant and valuable experience. Harold C. Cross, historian for the Montreal Y.M.C.A., also generously shared much useful material with the writer. The Canadian National

Council staff were always considerate, both in providing materials and in freeing the writer from other obligations. Memoranda provided by Harry Ballantyne, C. W. Bishop, Howard Crocker, J. M. Dudley and C. R. Sayer at the request of the writer were of considerable value in clarifying specific issues. Mrs. Edwin Espy and Mr. W. R. Cook undertook special phases of research which considerably enriched the materials which follow. Miss Ella Geddes, the only full-time associate in this project, was responsible for gathering and arranging materials, editing and checking references and footnotes, and in maintaining both order and morale in this rather extensive and, at times, tedious operation. The writer is especially appreciative of the help of John R. Seeley, who edited the full manuscript in a way which will be obvious to the reader, and in addition provided innumerable valuable suggestions upon which the writer drew continuously.

MURRAY G. ROSS.

*Toronto,
January 1, 1951.*

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	v
PART I	
THE Y.M.C.A. IN BRITISH NORTH AMERICA, 1851-1866	
I. THE BEGINNINGS OF THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION	3
1. Beginnings in England	
2. The Origin of the Association in British North America	
3. The First Centres of Y.M.C.A. Work	
II. PROGRAMME AND ORGANIZATION IN THE EARLY ASSOCIATIONS	22
1. Early Programme Developments	
2. Early Leaders of the Association	
3. Organizational Procedures	
4. Church Relations	
5. Conclusion	
III. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF INTERNATIONAL AND WORLD RELATIONSHIPS	37
1. The Confederation of Y.M.C.A.'s of North America	
2. Canadian Participation	
3. The Slavery Issue	
4. The World Conference of Y.M.C.A.'s	
5. Conclusion	

PART II

THE STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY IN
PIONEERING CANADA, 1867-1890

IV. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CLARITY REGARDING Y.M.C.A. PURPOSES	55
1. The Background for Association Work in Canada	
2. The Basis of Control Defined	
3. Y.M.C.A. Leaders in Canada	
4. Ideas and Values Implicit in the Y.M.C.A. Purpose	
5. Conclusion	
V. CHANGING PROGRAMME PATTERNS	75
1. Defining the Constituency of the Association	
2. Three Phases of Programme	
3. Work for Boys	
VI. THE EMERGING STRUCTURE OF THE ASSOCIATION	94
1. The First Era of Y.M.C.A. Building	
2. The Emergence of a Paid Staff	
3. The Development of Organizational Structure and Technique	
4. Finance	
5. Public Relations	
6. Conclusion	
VII. NEW FRONTIERS IN ASSOCIATION WORK	111
1. In Military Camps	
2. In Colleges	
3. Work for Railroad Men	
4. In Foreign Lands	
5. Other Extension Efforts	
6. Conclusion	
VIII. REGIONAL DEVELOPMENTS IN CANADA: INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE RELATIONSHIPS	134
1. The Maritime Provinces	
2. Ontario and Quebec	
3. The Prairie Provinces	
4. The West Coast	
5. Dominion Organization	
6. The International Committee	
7. The World's Alliance	

PART III

EXPANSION IN THE FIRST INDUSTRIAL
ERA, 1891-1920

IX. REDEFINITION OF GOALS IN AN URBAN SOCIETY	163
1. Defining the New Rôle of the Association	
2. Changes in Canadian Life	
3. Ideal and Realistic Conceptions of the Four-Fold Programme	
4. The Individual, Not Society, Must Be Saved	
5. The Criteria of Progress	
X. READJUSTMENT OF PROGRAMME IN AN URBAN SOCIETY	176
1. The Four-Fold Programme	
2. The Religious Programme	
3. Educational Work	
4. Social Activities	
5. Physical Education	
6. Conclusion	
XI. PIONEERING IN BOYS' WORK	194
1. The Basis for Expansion of Boys' Work	
2. Foundations of Boys' Work in Canada	
3. Early "Groupings" of Boys	
4. Early Programme Content	
5. First Boys' Conferences	
6. Canadian Standard Efficiency Tests	
7. Soldiers of the Soil	
8. Earn and Give	
9. Camping	
10. Conclusion	
XII. THE GROWTH AND SEPARATION OF STUDENT WORK	215
1. Student Conferences Define a Special Work	
2. Student-City Y.M.C.A. Relationships	
3. Growth of Student Work	
4. Student Programme	
5. Steps Leading to the Organization of the Student Christian Movement	
6. Developments Since 1920	

xiv CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIII. EXPANSION AND SPECIALIZATION	233
1. Railway Work	
2. Immigration Work	
3. Industrial Work	
4. Rural and County Work	
5. Lumbermen	
6. Women's Auxiliaries	
7. Foreign Work	
XIV. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CANADIAN SUPERVISORY AGENCIES	250
1. John Penman and Ontario and Quebec	
2. Fraser Marshall and the Maritimes	
3. "The Opening of the West"	
4. Events Leading to the Third Canadian Convention	
5. The Canadian Committee	
6. The Organization of the National Council	
XV. MILITARY AND WAR WORK	270
1. Boer War	
2. World War I (Background)	
3. Programme Services	
4. Questions of Policy	
5. Financing War Work	
6. Post-War Criticism and Praise	
XVI. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE	295
1. Laymen	
2. Secretaries	
3. Buildings	
4. Financial Structure	
5. Membership	
6. Relationships	

PART IV

THE SEARCH FOR CLEAR AIMS IN A
SECULAR SOCIETY, 1921-1951

XVII. CRISIS AND TRANSITION	319
1. The Habit of Success	
2. Cracks in the Y.M.C.A. "Empire"	
3. A Period of Reconstruction	
4. Conclusion	

CONTENTS xv

CHAPTER	PAGE
XVIII. THE SEARCH FOR DIRECTION IN THE COMPLEX MODERN WORLD	334
1. "The Acids of Modernity"	
2. Storms and Stresses in the Y.M.C.A.	
3. The Search for a New Purpose	
4. Conclusion	
XIX. RECENT PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENTS	353
1. Boys' Work	
2. Physical Work	
XX. PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENTS (Continued)	367
1. Young Men's and Co-Ed Work	
2. Social Education	
3. Recreation and Leisure	
4. Conclusion	
XXI. THE Y.M.C.A. AS AN ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH	381
1. The Great Depression	
2. Early Efforts to Aid Unemployed Youth	
3. Phase Two: Recreation	
4. Phase Three: Social Education and Action	
5. The Canadian Youth Commission	
6. The Years Ahead	
7. Conclusion	
XXII. NATIONAL ORGANIZATION AND FUNCTION	397
1. The Period of Recovery	
2. A Period of Ferment	
3. A Decade of Specialized Services	
4. Conclusion	
XXIII. THE Y.M.C.A. IN WORLD WAR II.	417
1. War Work Under New Conditions	
2. Y.M.C.A. War Services	
3. Conclusion	
XXIV. CHANGING PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE	432
1. Finances	
2. Membership	
3. Professional Secretariat	
4. Lay Leadership	
5. Buildings	
6. Relationships	

CHAPTER

PAGE

PART V

CONCLUSION

XXV. THE Y.M.C.A. IN PERSPECTIVE	455
1. Relationship to Social Developments	
2. The Y.M.C.A. as an Institution	
3. Factors in the Continuity of the Y.M.C.A.	
4. Emerging Problems of the Canadian Y.M.C.A.	
APPENDIX	475
NOTES	487
INDEX	513

List of Illustrations

Five Early Y.M.C.A. Buildings in Canada, <i>Frontispiece</i> .	FACING PAGE
Letter Reviewing the Steps Taken in the Organization of the Y.M.C.A.	14
Extracts from the Constitution and By-laws of the First Y.M.C.A. in Saint John, N.B.	15
Announcement of the Inaugural Meeting of the Charlotte-town Y.M.C.A.	46
Parts of a Letter by Chas. R. Brooke, Dealing with Slavery	47
Reports of the First "Dominion Conventions" in Quebec City	142
Part of a Letter Written by D. A. Budge Introducing James Naismith	143
One of the First Student Handbooks Issued by the University College Y.M.C.A., Toronto	174
A Report Issued by John Penman and C. M. Copeland to "Friends of the Association"	175
Announcement Calling a "Dominion Conference"	238
Some of the Provincial Committee of the Y.M.C.A. of Ontario and Quebec, 1900	239
The Graduating Class of the Canadian Y.M.C.A. Training School, 1913	239
A Page from <i>Canadian Manhood</i> Showing Copy of Pledge Card	270
Maritime Boys' Camp, 1896	271
Camp Pinecrest, Muskoka, 1919	271
Announcement of Two Conferences in 1911	398
Diploma for Achievement in the Canadian Standard Efficiency Tests	399
Announcement of Three Major Training Conferences, 1916	430
A Group of Canadian Y.M.C.A. Officers, 1918	431

agencies were the Student Volunteer Movement, the Y.W.C.A., and the Y.M.C.A. The S.V.M. had been organized in 1886 at Mt. Hermon, largely on the initiative of Y.M.C.A. leaders, for the purpose of organizing efforts for the recruitment of missionaries and to increase interest in missions on the campus.

This movement was strongly supported by Y.M.C.A. leaders, and, in some universities, the leadership of the two organizations was indistinguishable. The Y.W.C.A. carried on a programme somewhat similar to the Y.M.C.A., but for women students.

In 1914, an organization called the Canadian Student Council of Student Movements was created to provide "for better working co-operation" between these three student Christian movements. Charles W. Bishop, the General Secretary of the Canadian National Council, was asked to serve, and did serve as Honorary Chairman of this organization.¹⁷ While the war prevented the very effective operation of the Canadian Student Council, the latter encouraged interest in co-operation, and, perhaps, in amalgamation. In any case, when the Student Volunteer Conference was called to gather at Des Moines, Iowa, in December, 1919, there was an immediate and enthusiastic response in Canada. This interest was apparently focussed as much on the idea of a Canadian caucus, which would discuss the organization of a new Canadian student movement, as it was on the primary purpose of the Convention. Four hundred students, representing every university and almost every college in Canada, were present. It was, of course, the largest group of Canadian students ever to meet together for such a purpose, and most of the enthusiasm generated by this fact was thrown behind the idea of a separate movement. Charles Bishop presided at the meeting of Canadians at which "the sentiment among the students was strongly for the new and separate movement. The initiative came largely from this group and what voices were heard for the continuance of the Y connection, could not get their case adequately presented."¹⁸ The result was a resolution endorsing the proposal to merge the three movements into one, and requesting the Canadian Student Council to arrange a convention of the three movements to decide the question and to draft a constitution for the new movement.¹⁹

Up to this point, the members of the Executive of the National Council of Y.M.C.A.'s appeared, on the whole, to be

unaware of the movement of thought, much less of action, in the student Associations. In September of 1920, they received their first official notification of the impending change. This came in the form of a carefully worded resolution, submitted by the National Council's own Student Committee, which said in part:

We gratefully welcome the demonstration of renewed vitality in the Student Associations, which is seeking democratic expression in the present Movement, and appreciate that only along the lines of self-government and direct responsibility can a successful organization develop. . . . The present form of organization is the creature of the Student Associations as they have expressed themselves in the past, and has been maintained on the lines as nearly democratic as the interest and support of the Association has made possible. Those who have been called to leadership under past conditions have looked forward to and laboured earnestly for the day in which the Student Associations would become sufficiently numerous and sufficiently conscious of their National unity to develop a Movement along more democratic lines than have been possible in the past. Such an outcome was ripening when the war intervened, and the spontaneous effort which now succeeds the war to find a new form of organization is greeted as a logical and welcome development.²⁰

In the light of later developments it is clear that (in spite of their approval of this resolution, which recommended the calling of the Student Conference to consider the formation of a new movement) the Y.M.C.A. Executive was not convinced of the wisdom of this move. It is equally clear, however, that regardless of their real feelings in this matter, they conducted themselves with decorum in negotiations with the students and permitted the change in the organization work to be made with a minimum of overt tension.

The new movement was conceived by many students as a transition from a situation of control and domination by non-student leaders, to one in which there would be freedom and an opportunity to come to grips with the real issues of the day. In the campaign to assure a sufficient vote to launch the new movement, the Y.M.C.A. was often painted in an unfavourable light, and the now well-known song "Poisoning the Student Mind" was popularized. This song, which had innumerable verses "was written as a satire on what was pictured to the students as the attitude of the general Y.M.C.A. toward the



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